

Charles Spencer meets a talented former prisoner finding a future in the drama world

Can theatre save souls? Joe White, who served 13 years for murder, believes that it can

TEN YEARS ago, the director Max Stafford-Clark was preparing to stage the premiere of *Our Country's Good*. It tells the true story of the first theatrical performance in Australia, a production of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, by a group of English convicts who had recently arrived in the God-forsaken colony on the other side of the world.

Now Stafford-Clark is one of those directors who has always been keen on research and authenticity, so he, the cast and the play's author, Timberlake Wertenbaker, all went to see a play performed by the inmates at Wormwood Scrubs.

It was a piece by Howard Barker — well, you can't get lucky all the time — and although the lifters performing the play were joined by three professional actors, Stafford-Clark had no trouble in identifying the star of the evening. He was a prisoner called Joe White, "tall, thin and incredibly pale, like a great skinny plant forced to shoot up to find the light."

Max was so impressed by Joe that he was about to introduce him to casting director Patsy Pollock, but before he did, he asked the star of the Scrubs how much longer he had to serve. "Ten to 15 years," replied White. "There didn't seem such a hurry for him to meet Patsy after all," Stafford-Clark noted drily at the time.

In fact White was released a year ago this month, after serving 13 years for murder. And with a neatness that would seem artificial in a work of fiction, he not only directed and starred in a prison production of *Our Country's Good*, he is now working as assistant director to Stafford-Clark on *Out of Joint's* tenth anniversary

revival of the play, which opens at the Young Vic tomorrow.

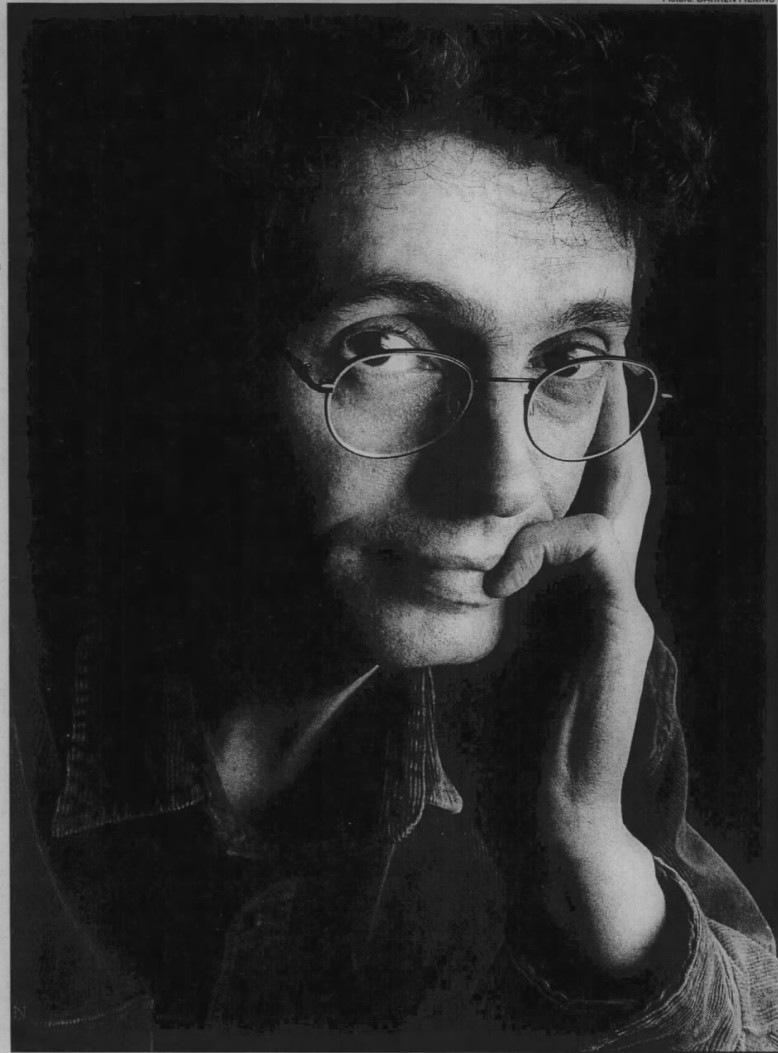
I have to admit I felt anxious about meeting White. It is not every day you sit next to a convicted killer. When I told my five-year-old son I was going to see a murderer, he went all round-eyed and put one of his plastic cowboy pistols in my briefcase. As the PR man led White and me into a pitch-black Young Vic Studio, I wasn't convinced that it would be much use, should things turn nasty.

In fact you only have to be in White's company for five minutes to feel ashamed of such glib, nervous jokes. Now 34 (he turned 21 on remand), he exudes an intense, pained integrity, though there is a gently self-mocking humour too. Even after a year on the outside, he retains his prison pallor and has the aura of a man who has seen too much and been banged up for too long.

The circumstances of the killing will give anyone who has ever dabbled with psychedelic drugs an uneasy insight into just how easy it might be to become a murderer. At the age of 20, Joe and one of his closest friends were tripping on acid at the family home near Aldershot. They'd been drinking too, and Joe was already being treated for depression after dropping out of sixth-form college. "It was," he says with notable understatement, "the wrong time for me to be taking LSD."

IN MID-TRIP he chanced upon the shotgun that his father, a former forester, kept around the house. "I'd had a previous suicide attempt with it the year before. Seeing that gun, in the state I was in, had a lot of bad memories for me." Even now, he finds it hard to describe how he came to shoot his friend dead. "There was no real motive. I was unhappy and desperate and unfortunately it came out towards completely the wrong person."

Because he was being treated for depression, a plea of insanity was considered at his trial. "But, given the seriousness of the offence, that



Picture: DARREN FILKINS

Stand-out: White was spotted by director Max Stafford-Clark in a performance at Wormwood Scrubs prison

could have meant a hospital section — and Broadmoor. So in the end we decided it would be better to plead guilty to murder and just hope the judge took into account all the mitigating circumstances. Three years into the sentence I discovered the judge had recommended a tariff of six years. Unfortunately the Home Secretary of the day, Leon Brittan, doubled it."

The theme of *Our Country's Good* is that "theatre is an expression of civilisation", and it movingly shows how the brutally treated 18th-century convicts find their lives enriched and even redeemed by performing Farquhar's good-hearted Restoration comedy. That might sound over-optimistic, even sentimental. White knows that it can happen.

"In prison, in order to survive, you have to harden yourself. You can't vent your frustrations because the system sees that as being disruptive. And among the prisoners there is a real sense of the shutters being down, of not showing your emotions. Yet it is amazing, once you

get a group together and start working on a play, a trust develops and people are able to open up."

Real transformations can occur, he says. "There was a chap in our prison production of *Our Country's Good* — he'd had a tough childhood in the Gorbals, and had what he called "battle scars" on his face from knife fights. He'd grown his hair very long at the front to hide them, and he always talked with his head down. But as rehearsals went on, he began to push his hair back and by the end, when he actually went on stage, he had his hair tied back. And he said it was the first time for 15 years that he had shown his face to the world. It was through wanting to perform that he was able to do it."

There's a moving speech in *Our Country's Good* when one of the convicts says of when he's acting, "I forget everything else... I forget the things I've done... I don't have to hate anymore." They strike a particular chord with White.

"That is so true. And it is perhaps why theatre is seen

by some in the prison system as being subversive. What you are doing is creating a refuge from the day-to-day grind of prison life. When I was doing theatre in prison, it was an oasis where I could forget, for however brief a time, that I was a prisoner with a number and a sentence."

WHILE says he will always have to live with the fact that he killed his friend. "I can't pretend it didn't happen. But there comes a point when you have to ask yourself whether you are going to spend the rest of your life in total regret and depression, or whether you are going to do something with the rest of your life, turn it into something positive."

Some prison governors are enthusiastic about prison drama. Others aren't, viewing theatre as a disruptive activity that allows inmates to enjoy themselves too much. What's clear, talking to White, is that in prison, theatre is still perceived as dangerous. Even a classic play such as *Waiting for Go-*

dot was banned by the authorities because it was seen as too "negative"; it is indeed hard to think of a work that better captures the grinding futility of a life sentence.

While he was in prison White did get fixed up with an agent, and since his release he has played small roles in films, and worked twice as an assistant director. What he wants to do now is direct a play on his own.

"I know it's a big jump, but I want someone, somewhere to say 'have a go yourself'. I am quietly optimistic. I managed to get shows on in prison, despite the system. I ought to have learned a few lessons about being determined, resilient and patient."

White lost the whole of his young manhood doing his time in prison. What it might just have given him in return — and Stafford-Clark speaks of his work very highly — is a real future as a director. Certainly just meeting this quietly impressive man rekindled my own faith in the transforming power of theatre.

OFFER